

SANSKRIT SCHOLARS IN SPAIN AND MEXICO
IN THE 19TH CENTURY AND THE COMPARISON
BETWEEN SANSKRIT AND NAHUATL

In the second half of the 19th century, interest in the Sanskrit language and culture grew among European scholars, especially among those who spoke German, French and English. This is common knowledge.

It is less known that this interest in the marvellous world of Sanskrit had also reached the Spanish-speaking countries, where enthusiastic researchers on the subject began to appear.

It is my intention, at this VIIth World Sanskrit Conference, to remember two forerunners of Sanskrit studies among those of us who speak the language of Cervantes.

The first of them, Francisco García Ayuso, was a Spanish philologist and orientalist who was born in 1835 and died in 1897.

As he was interested in the linguistics of the Orient, García Ayuso published an Arabic grammar and some other works. One of them is the book on which I shall dwell briefly: *The Study of Philology in its Relation to Sanskrit* (*El estudio de la filología en su relación con el sánscrit*), published in Madrid in 1871 and translated into French in 1884.

It is a book some 376 pages long, divided into three parts. The first deals with language in general, with chapters on its nature and origin, as well as on linguistics and philology. The second part deals with the distinctive characters of the principal languages, according to what was known at the time and, after a chapter which focuses on Indo-European languages, it dedicates another specifically to Sanskrit.

García Ayuso's work is admirable, especially if we take into

account that Spain was in his time the only country in Europe in whose universities Sanskrit was *not* studied, a fact that he himself underlines in the book we are commenting on.

The admiration of Francisco García Ayuso for Sanskrit and its culture is expressed several times in his book. For example, after stating that the study of the sciences has borrowed its terminology from Greek or Latin, he says:

But a language that possesses a rich literature and that has reached great heights in its historical development, has other applications of a greater importance than that of supplying technical terms for the other sciences, as Sanskrit has sufficiently proved. The intrinsic merit of its literature, the powerful influence that for many centuries it has brought to bear on the civilization and intellectual culture of some of the peoples of Asia and Oceania, and that it has been able to exert on the Indo-Europeans before the dispersal of the various members of the family, and above all the excellent results it gives in its application to the comparative study of philology, linguistics and mythology, make the Sanskrit language able to occupy a distinguished place beside the two languages called classical, whose applications in philology are not as universal nor the results obtained with them as certain as those offered by the sacred language of the Indians¹.

We all know precisely what was the degree of advancement and which were the characteristics of philology and linguistics in the second half of the 19th century, and García Ayuso, although ahead of his time with respect to his mother country, could not be beyond his time.

After briefly analysing the languages of India, touching on six groups of Dravidic tongues, he states:

The opinion of those who hold the Indian people to be ignorant and simple-minded, slaves of their superstitions and incapable of making their imagination surmount the material objects which surround them (we must remember that the author wrote in 1870) is totally groundless and has lost the fictional value it had, once the history and literature of that people have ceased to be a mystery for the Europeans.

Now that we are able to study their literary works as we do our own and Kalidasa's creations circulate among us as do Homer's and Virgil's, such an assertion reveals ignorance...².

1. GARCÍA AYUSO, FRANCISCO, *El estudio de la filología en su relación con el sanskrit*, Imprenta Estereotipia de M. Rivadeneyra, Madrid, 1871. Pages 190 and 191.

2. *Ibidem*, page 192.

And going further, in the style of his day, García Ayuso says:

When in the rest of the nations of the orb, a weak ray of light barely enlightened their intelligence, the science of the *rishis*, masters and prophets of their people, shone from the Indus to the Ganges, from the Himalayas to the Indian gulf...³

And he goes on to say:

...the Indian considers himself in the world as a pilgrim and directs his thoughts and acts to objects greater and more sublime than those that surround him; the Divinity, before which he always shows a profound respect, fills all his heart, and his goal is to join the personal *self* to that of the Everlasting...⁴

After briefly analysing the essence of Hinduism, the Spanish author concludes:

A people who look at present life and all that is related to it from that point of view may not be important and influential in the *political history* of the world but it will occupy a distinguished place in the *intellectual history* of mankind⁵.

The book, besides covering the characteristics of the Sanskrit language, also looks at diverse aspects of its culture, including the astronomy and medicine of ancient India and not omitting, among other subjects, an ample reference to Pāṇini's grammar.

More or less at the same time, Doctor Gumersindo Mendoza was interested in Sanskrit in Mexico. Mendoza was a physician with many scientific interests who in 1868 was one of the promoters and founders of the first Natural History Society of Mexico. From 1876 to 1883, he was curator of the National Museum of Archaeology, History and Ethnography. In various of his numerous works as a polygraph, he insisted on finding similarities between ancient Mexican art and the art of China and Japan and, with regards to the subject of this paper, he wrote a *Comparative Study Between Sanskrit and Nahuatl* (*Estudio comparativo entre el sánscrito y el náguatl*), a brief booklet published in Mexico in 1878.

We would do well to remember that at that time, Mexico had

3. *Ibidem*, page 193.

4. *Ibidem*, page 193.

5. *Ibidem*, page 193.

gained its independence from Spain only 57 years before and that those 57 years belonged to the 19th century and not to the 20th, in which all sorts of communications media join the territories of this planet. Mexico was in those years barely starting to build up its conscience as a nation. The war with the United States, in which that country took from Mexico more than half of its territory, had ended only 31 years before. Furthermore, the co-existence between Indians, half-castes and people of Spanish descent did not facilitate at all the creation of a national sentiment and the dictatorial government of Porfirio Díaz maintained a feudal régime. Mendoza's enthusiasm not only for the natural sciences but also for anthropology in all its aspects and for comparative linguistics, searching for a relation between the Nahuatl and Indian cultures, is all the more noteworthy under those conditions.

Gumersindo Mendoza's work seeks to find an agreement between Sanskrit words and words in the Nahuatl language. In effect, there are certain coincidences.

If we take into account that the letter «a» can be, in Nahuatl, the root *atl* (water) in composition with another, in which case it loses the «tl», as in *acalli*, *alaztic*, *atoyac*, *ayotl*, etcetera, in all cases related to «water», there are, in effect, certain coincidences that Mendoza pointed out in his study.

He begins with *ap*, which in Sanskrit means «water, waters personified» (Monier Williams, Benfey, Renou-Stchoupak and others), comparing it to the Nahuatl *apantli* which, beginning with *ap*, means «flow of water, canal, irrigation ditch». And he mentions *apano* which in Nahuatl means «to cross a flow of water» from *atl*, «water», and *pano*, «to cross a river on foot, by swimming, on a small boat or otherwise».

But coming back to «a», it can also be, in Nahuatl, a negative adverb, as in Sanskrit it has a negative sense as a prefix. Mendoza also compares *amara*, «immortal, imperishable» in Sanskrit, to *amiki*, which in Nahuatl means «immortal». Through this, we are able to see that if «a» is common to «water» and its derivatives in Sanskrit and Nahuatl, the same letter as a prefix coincides also in its negative sense in both languages.

Mendoza also noticed that *āyoga* in Sanskrit is «river bank, pier to which boats are tied» and that in Nahuatl *ayolco* is «gulf, cove or

bay». Once more «a» is a monosyllabic root related to «water», a coincidence that does not stop there for if in Sanskrit *alabu* is «bottle gourd», that is, a container for carrying water or other liquids, in Nahuatl *alacatl* is precisely the same, a long gourd used for carrying water or other liquids.

Mendoza come upon other coincidences between Sanskrit and Nahuatl: *kal*, in Sanskrit «to sound», and *kalani*, in Nahuatl «to sound, to ring».

Kal, in Sanskrit, is also «to count (also a period of time)» and *kalpa* is «a fabulous period of time». In Nahuatl we have *kalpan* whose derivative *kalli* is «the name of a year and the third day of the month» and *kalkayotl* is «distance, space between two beams». And «time» in Nahuatl is *kagüi*.

There are other various coincidences between both languages which we do not have space enough here to enumerate but... We have done some checking up in the field of glottochronology, such as comparing, in Sanskrit and Nahuatl, the hundred concepts selected for such purposes by Anglo-Saxon linguists and the results have been negative. In the words most often employed by human beings anywhere in the world, there are no coincidences between Sanskrit and Nahuatl. Surely objections to that system could be found but it is nevertheless significant that there are no coincidences in one hundred basic words.

Such a situation has led us to believe that the coincidences noted could, according to what was established by J.H. Greenberg, be the five percent of similarities due to chance. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that linguistic coincidences do occur which have no relation whatsoever between them, of which a classic example is «bad» in English and *bad* in Persian.

An in-depth comparative study between Sanskrit and Nahuatl would be interesting but it requires an arduous task that would have to begin by the reconstruction of Nahuatl prior to the arrival in Mexico of the Spanish conquerors.

The Spanish friars studied Nahuatl with evangelistic purposes, but at the same time, they devoted themselves to making all documents pertaining to the Mexican civilization disappear.

Furthermore, at the same time as they destroyed all documents in Nahuatl, the Spanish conquerors forbade the language of the

conquered and imposed the use of Spanish.

The missionaries who were interested in Nahuatl in order to spread their religion insisted on reducing that language to the Spanish alphabet of the time and following with it the same method that Antonio de Nebrija had followed in Spain with respect to Latin. The result of all of this is that the Nahuatl that is still spoken today in Mexico, full of Castilian turns, is very different from the one spoken before the coming of the Spaniards and to this day, regardless of the notable work of distinguished Nahuatl researchers, there is still no Nahuatl grammar written with all the up-to-date scientific requirements.

There have often been people who, based on coincidences or similarities in sculptures, insist on finding a relation between India and the pre-Columbian cultures of America. Coincidences can be found with relative ease. For example, the Kurgan tombs⁶ prove that in that culture, an antecedent of the Aryan culture, a magical religious significance was attributed to the horse, the snake and the boar. The Indian culture gathers all three up in the *aśvamedha*, in the third avatar of Viṣṇu, Varāha, and in the Nāgas, sons of Kadru. The worship of the snake, called Quetzalcoatl, is also very important in the Nahuatl culture. But that means nothing in itself.

We do not believe in research work in which a preconceived idea is imposed at all costs. To date, no relation has been proved between Sanskrit and Nahuatl, save a few coincidences, and our scientific responsibility demands that we admit this.

But we believe, however, that Gumersindo Mendoza's effort was notable and most valuable in relation to his milieu and his time and that, for this reason, he deserves to be remembered with respect.

If not proved otherwise, he was the forerunner of studies on Sanskrit among those born on the American continent.

6. Discovered by Marija Gimbutas, the Kurgan (burial mound) culture is the antecedent of the Indo-European culture and from the beginning of the 4th millenium it spread through a vast territory which goes from the lower valley of the Volga to the steppes of Kazakhstan.